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Notes on the Red Heifer

HENRY PRESERVED SMITH

MEADVILLE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IT has already been pointed out by Professor Bewer¹ that the rite of the red heifer described in Num. 19 is an ancient sacrifice to the dead. I wish to supplement his argument by giving some details which are explicable only on his hypothesis. He notes the red color of the victim, parallel to the red color of offerings to chthonic divinities among the Greeks. The appropriation of red to the departed is, however, much more widespread² than would be indicated by this single instance.

The sex of the victim is as significant as the color, for female victims were usually chosen for the dead. The Mishna requires that the red cow of our text be unapproached by the male, and we are reminded that Ulysses vows to sacrifice a barren cow to the shade of Tiresias.³

The most remarkable thing about the red heifer is that the blood was not brought into the sanctuary. We remember at once that the giving of the blood to the shades to placate, revivify, or nourish them is the important thing in the rites of the dead. Moreover, the offerings to the dead are wholly consumed, usually on the ground, as seems to have been the case with the heifer.

The place of the sacrifice is significant. The law directs that it be without the camp in such a position that the blood can be sprinkled toward the face of the sanctuary.

¹ *JBL*, xxiv. pp. 41-44.

² See an article "Rot und Tot," in the *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, ix. pp. 1 ff.

³ Cited by Rohde, *Psyche*, p. 54; cf. Chantepie de la Saussaye, *Religionsgeschichte*, ii. p. 236.

But the sanctuary in the mind of the Levitical writers is the temple of Jerusalem. Their intent, therefore, is that the rite be performed on the Mount of Olives. The Talmud specifically asserts that this was the locality.⁴ But the Mount of Olives has always been the chief burial place of Jerusalem. The ancient sepulchres there are evidence that this was the case in ancient times as it is the case now. This would be exactly the place for a sacrifice to the dead. And it is noteworthy that the Greek text of our passage explicitly directs that the cow shall be brought *to a clean place*, and the Hebrew commands that the ashes be laid up in a clean place. The emphasis laid upon this shows that the place was one liable to contamination, even if we do not take the phrase here as an euphemism.⁵ The Talmud tells us that a bridge was built from the Temple to the place of burning and on this the heifer and her train made their progress. This is because of the casuistic theory that the taboo of a sepulchre did not infect one who was separated from it by an air space; that is, who passed over it by an arch or vault. This arrangement indicates again the nature of the place at which the rite was performed.

The Mishna⁶ relates that the pyre on which the heifer was burnt was made in the form of a tower with a window in it looking toward the Temple. Now in Arab antiquity a tent or booth was erected over the grave, primarily as a residence of the soul while it lingered near the body, and, as a secondary consideration, for the convenience of the mourners.⁷ At the end of the period it would be natural to burn such a structure, both because it was taboo and because it would be conveyed by the burning to the world of spirits where it might be useful to the departed. It does not seem extravagant to see in the pyre described in the Mishna the survival of this early booth.

The cedar wood, scarlet stuff, and hyssop, which are to be

⁴ Middoth, I. 3.

⁵ As was suggested by Professor Haupt when this paper was read.

⁶ *Para*, iii. 8.

⁷ Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, i. p. 255.

thrown into the flames, have long been a puzzle to the expositors. The same materials appear in the rite of cleansing for the leper, but there they are not burnt. It is, of course, possible, that they possessed some cathartic or prophylactic power, but I think another explanation possible. One of the most widespread funeral customs is that of burning the property of the deceased at his tomb. That this was done in Israel is apparently indicated by the mention of the burnings made for certain kings (Jer. 34 5, 2 Chr. 16 14, 21 19). Where the property left was valuable in the eyes of the survivors it early became customary to substitute articles of inferior value or even imitation articles like the paper money still sacrificed in China. At last such a custom would require only rudiments or fragments sufficient to quiet the conscience of the survivors. Such fragments I find in the cedar wood, scarlet stuff, and hyssop of our text. The cedar wood would represent the warrior's lance, the scarlet stuff his robe of state, the hyssop would stand for the humbler household implements.

Ostensibly the object of the rite is to prepare a water of purification. If, however, the efficacy of the liquid was given it by the ashes of a sacrifice to the God of Israel, it should avail against defilement of any kind. But as a matter of fact its use is strictly limited to cases of defilement from the dead. And as has often been noted by the commentators the water seems to have the two contradictory effects of defiling the clean and of purifying those who were polluted. If it were derived from an original sacrifice to the dead, its polluting effect would need no explanation. The question, therefore, suggests itself whether in fact the water has a purifying effect. Is it not rather the intention of the law to insist that the rites of consecration to the dead be fully complied with? The traditional period of mourning (seven days) is to be observed as a time of consecration to the departed. This consecration is marked by the sprinkling with the ashes on the third day and on the seventh. But after the time has elapsed the person affected is still under obligation to wash his clothes and take the ritual bath

before he can enter the sanctuary (vs. 19). The reason why the rite should be insisted upon is not far to seek. In popular belief the ghost which was neglected would be angry and would inflict disease or calamity upon those who omitted the customary rites. The priestly tradition found this belief too strong to be eradicated. It was, therefore, indulged. The customary rites were permitted, in fact enjoined, only they were now placed under supervision of the priest, and made a quasi-sacrifice to Yahweh.